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VENTURA COUNTY

Simi Residents Blame Illnesses on Lab

Several Orangewood district neighbors, who live a few miles from the Rocketdyne facility, have either cancer or thyroid conditions.

By Amanda Covarrubias
Times Staff Writer

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Several longtime residents of a Simi Valley neighborhood suffer from lung cancer or the thyroid condition Graves' disease. And they think they might know why: contamination from a nearby rocket-testing site.

Resident Stanford Lovett met some of his ill neighbors for the first time Dec. 11 at a public hearing on the cleanup of the Santa Susana Field Laboratory, where missiles were often tested during the Cold War.

As they traded stories, Lovett realized his neighbors' symptoms sounded uncomfortably familiar: rapid weight loss, lack of muscle control, heart palpitations, throbbing headaches, irritability and severe night sweats.

"I couldn't believe what I was hearing," said Lovett, 42, who has lived in the Orangewood tract of Simi Valley for nearly two decades. The neighborhood near Erringer Road and Cochran Street is about three miles from the lab.

Since that meeting at the Grand Vista Hotel in Simi Valley, Lovett and his new friends have talked on the telephone several times to figure out what to do next, if anything. They think the rocket-testing site operated by Rocketdyne, a division of aerospace giant Boeing, is to blame for producing soil and air pollutants that have attacked their thyroid glands. The gland serves as a sort of thermostat for the body.

Rocketdyne officials say they are not responsible for residents' maladies and maintain that any chemicals and toxins generated by the hilltop site have been contained within its 2,668 acres. State investigators say they cannot prove the 54-year-old site was the source of perchlorate discovered this year in 18 wells in or near Simi Valley. Perchlorate is a highly toxic chemical used in rocket fuel.

Five years ago, 315 people from Simi Valley and the west San Fernando Valley filed lawsuits against Rocketdyne for allegedly causing them to become sick or their loved ones to die.

Lovett and his neighbors are not party to those complaints and said they had not been aware they existed. The cases remain tied up in federal court in Los Angeles.

Orangewood is not the closest neighborhood in Simi Valley to the lab site. That distinction goes to Santa Susana Knolls in the foothills below Rocketdyne.

Lovett's neighbor, David Plunkett, said he is compiling a database of everyone he meets in Simi Valley who has cancer or a thyroid-related illness, such as Graves' disease. His wife, Christina, 38, was diagnosed early this year with hyperthyroidism -- a condition that causes her metabolism to speed up.

"People are popping up all over the place with Graves' disease and thyroid problems," said Christina Plunkett, who is tall and rail thin.

The Plunketts have lived in the area for 10 years. David is healthy, but their 7-year-old son has cystic fibrosis.

Christina said her symptoms appeared more than a year ago, when she started experiencing heart palpitations, her hair fell out and she lost 55 pounds in two months. Her condition deteriorated to the point that she had to quit her job as a waitress. She remains in constant pain and shakes all the time, she said.

Another neighbor, Ralph Lopez, lived in the neighborhood for eight years before moving to Moorpark two years ago. The 54-year-old real estate agent was diagnosed with Graves' disease nearly two years ago after his weight plunged.

"People said I looked good, but I was having other problems," Lopez said. He finally saw his doctor after waking up in the middle of the night covered in sweat.

Lovett said he went from hyperthyroidism two years ago to hypothyroidism, which produces symptoms associated with a slowed-down metabolism. Now his doctor suspects he may have Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that attacks the saliva glands.

With stiffness in his legs, arms, fingers and feet, his condition makes it difficult for him to walk. His wife helps him up and down the stairs of their home and into his pajamas at night.

At one point, his perplexed doctor sent him to the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, where he underwent tests for a rare disorder called Stiff Man's syndrome. He is awaiting the results.

"So many things are so out of whack, the doctors don't understand what's going on," Lovett said.

Another neighbor, Quynh Tran, 52, was diagnosed with lung cancer in July 2001. A resident of Simi Valley for nearly 20 years, he lives around the corner from the Plunketts. Tran, a software engineer for Columbia Pictures, said one of his brothers-in-law, who lived nearby, died of lung cancer 10 years ago. Neither he nor his brother-in-law smoked, Tran said.

His mother and another brother-in-law, both residents in the same neighborhood, also suffered from thyroid-related conditions, which have since stabilized, he said.

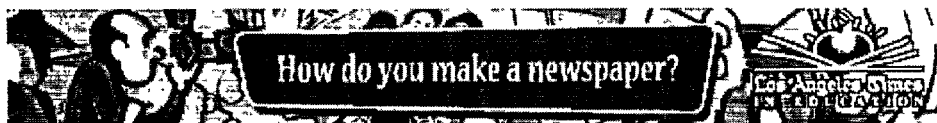
Researchers at UCLA are conducting a health study of residents living near the Rocketdyne site under a federal initiative sponsored by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. But the study involves only cancer rates, not thyroid disorders, said Bert Cooper, who is overseeing the project.

The study was launched in 1999 at the request of U.S. Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, both California Democrats, and Congressman Elton Gallegly (R-Simi Valley) after residents began coming down with cancer and other diseases. The study should be completed in another year, Cooper said.

Lovett said any information will make residents feel better.

"This is something that is killing people," Lovett said. "My wife is scared right now, living in Simi Valley."

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